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Faulty 2-way radios put officers in danger in NC prisons

BY AMES ALEXANDER
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Prison officer Sierra Gravitte found herself in a bind. She was the only officer inside a locked unit at Polk Correctional Institution, north of Durham, two years ago when she ordered an inmate into his cell. He refused. Gravitte pulled out her radio

to call for backup – but it wouldn’t work. Instead, the radio emitted a beeping noise signaling a low battery. Hearing that, the inmate approached Gravitte. “I started backing up,” said Gravitte, 28. “And I pulled out my pepper spray and baton and said, ‘If you want to go, let’s go.’” The inmate didn’t attack Gravitte. But for about 15 minutes, she said, she was trapped

inside the prison block with about seven inmates – and no way to communicate with other officers. “They could have ... raped me or killed me and nobody would have known,” said Gravitte, who resigned from the prison earlier this year after four years



Sierra Gravitte

on the job. “We need radios to work. Or people get hurt.” In interviews with The Charlotte Observer, more than a dozen current and former prison employees described a potentially life-threatening problem: The two-way radios that officers are issued often don’t work properly, leaving them without a crucial safety tool. The disclosures – made by officers who worked at nine different prisons – come during

a deadly time for North Carolina’s prison employees. Since April, five workers have died as a result of attacks inside the prisons. In response to questions from the Observer, a spokeswoman for the state Department of Public Safety said that managers have directed all prisons “to inventory and assess their radios and PA systems.” But prison leaders say better technology has made radios more reliable, and that only 5 percent of radios now malfunction. They say they are quick to repair and replace broken radios. “The Secretary’s Office and Prisons Administration under-

SEE RADIOS, 8A

Criminal cases test lawmakers’ reach

BY ANNE BLYTHE
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RALEIGH Nearly a year and a half has passed since Carol Anderson and Dale Herman were among the “Moral Monday” protesters arrested at the N.C. Legislative Building protesting House Bill 2. The controversial law they were protesting has since been repealed and replaced. But the criminal cases against Anderson and Herman have lingered, and could determine whether North Carolina lawmakers overstepped their constitutional authority when amending rules that govern where people can go, what they can do and how much noise they can make while inside the Legislative Building. On Jan. 23, District Court Judge Joyce Hamilton found Anderson and Herman guilty of trespass charges, but dismissed allegations that they violated Legislative Building rules after finding those rules unconstitutional on several fronts. Both rulings have been appealed to Wake County Superior Court for further proceedings that have resulted in an unusual request. Paul Coble, head of the Legislative Services Commission, has asked to be allowed to intervene in the criminal cases. The commission is 10 lawmakers with Senate leader Phil Berger and House Speaker Tim Moore acting as chairmen. “It’s unprecedented for the legislature to try to intervene in a criminal case,” said Scott Holmes, a Durham-based attorney representing the protesters. “I don’t know of this ever happening.” Not only does Holmes object to the rules for visitors to the building where lawmakers conduct their business, he also questions the General Assem-

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Brannon Balsley, left, helps his son Austin Balsley, 7, with homework last month at their Holly Springs home. Austin attends Holly Grove Elementary School, which is on a year-round calendar. Some Holly Springs students could be moved to a new traditional-calendar school.

Year-round schools, once facing opposition, now finding support

BY T. KEUNG HUI
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HOLLY SPRINGS Wake County families fought against year-round schools a decade ago, but some parents are now battling to keep their children on a non-traditional calendar as the school system shifts away from

the year-round option. The debate is now focused on Holly Springs, but the outcome in this suburban town could affect families throughout Wake as the school board decides which calendar to use at specific schools. Wake’s new student assignment proposal would move hundreds of Holly Springs students from year-round schools into a traditional-

calendar school opening next year. Some parents are lobbying for the new school, Buckhorn Creek Elementary, to open on a year-round calendar, but school leaders say it’s too late to make the change. In response to the heated opposition, the school board has promised to revisit its decision to open all new elementary and middle schools on a traditional calendar. Board members say

they want to know whether the strong outcry that emerged years ago against year-round schools still exists. “For the last five years, we have heard from the community time and time again that we need more traditional-calendar schools west of (N.C.) 55,” school board member Jim Martin said at the Nov. 21 board meeting. “That is why the decision was made to open all schools on the traditional calendar.” Martin’s comments were met with cries of “where?” “no” and “stop talking” from the audience of passionate year-round school supporters. Parents who have been lobbying to open Buckhorn Creek Elementary on a year-round calendar say the board is using outdated data to

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